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## DREISER'S LAST WORK: *THE BULWARK AND THE STOIC*— CONVERSION OR CONTINUITY?

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"...the atmosphere surrounding [Solon and Benecia] seemed too fixed, too still. It was all too well ordered, too perfect, for frail, restless, hungry human need." (*The Bulwark*)<sup>1</sup>

"If a man come to your door, go and meet yourself." (*The Stoic*)<sup>2</sup>

While *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* are generally considered to be Dreiser's best novels, *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic* tend to be seen as his weakest.<sup>3</sup> *The Stoic*, as part of the Cowperwood trilogy, still provokes more critical interest than would seem to accord with its merits; but *The Bulwark* is usually dismissed out of hand, partly because of its apparent lack of kinship with the rest of Dreiser's work. It has been seen, both stylistically and thematically, to constitute a break with all Dreiser's previous fiction.<sup>4</sup> Thus it is not surprising that, according to one recent estimate, *The Bulwark* is rivaled, today, only by *Jennie Gerhardt* in the lack of critical attention it receives.<sup>5</sup>

*The Bulwark*, to be sure, lacks the tension and richness of Dreiser's earlier work. Such dramatic conflict as it does possess would seem to be virtually nullified by the sense of equanimity or piety which informs it. In this sense, among others, it seems no accident that *The Bulwark*, like *Jennie*

Gerhardt, should be neglected by the majority of Dreiser's readers. If Jennie's benign passivity may be said to drain *Jennie Gerhardt* of some of its dramatic energy, so, to some extent, Solon's serene faith enervates *The Bulwark*. *Jennie Gerhardt* and *The Bulwark* have more than such slackness in common, however. From my point of view, at least, it may be said that *The Bulwark* is in many ways a kind of rewriting of *Jennie Gerhardt*.

The portrait of Solon, for example, may be seen as a direct reworking, in greater detail, of Dreiser's conception of Gerhardt. Despite critical claims that Dreiser's sympathy for Solon involves a sharp deviation from his habitual harshness toward fathers who fail,<sup>6</sup> Solon has his clear antecedents in Gerhardt. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, Jennie's father is regarded with a great deal of sympathy. His effort to make sense of life with the aid of his inflexible religiosity is seen to be sincere and honorable, if hopelessly futile. Gerhardt ultimately finds in Jennie's "fall" a most baffling challenge to his whole conception of life. Gerhardt's "ruined" daughter--whose actions, as he understands them, should send her "right to hell"<sup>7</sup>--clearly emerges as his most innocent, kind, and loving child. This paradox constitutes a threat to Gerhardt's whole life-effort at organizing the chaos of experience into a coherent system by which to live and be sustained.<sup>8</sup>

As *Jennie Gerhardt* unfolds, Gerhardt's experience of life becomes more and more incomprehensible to him. His bewilderment culminates after the death of his wife in the feeling that his "whole life comes to nothing." (p. 87) In the face of the ambiguity and complexity of experience, however, Gerhardt's prescriptive dogmatism finally becomes less important to him than the daughter who has seemed to violate law, convention, and the assumptions of a lifetime. Gerhardt comes in the end to recognize his wayward daughter as "goodness itself." (p. 334) He finds his way to this "truth" through painful endurance, love, and sympathy. Thus Gerhardt may be seen as one of the few essentially benign, suffering, and even morally educable characters in Dreiser's work.

If we consider *The Bulwark* more carefully in relation to *Jennie Gerhardt*, the similarities become striking and serve to establish that *The Bulwark* is not the mere afterthought of a suddenly pious old writer. Instead, although *The Bulwark* is hardly a major novelistic achievement, the issues it explores must nonetheless be recognized as central to Dreiser's life-long preoccupations.

From a certain point of view, the plot of *The Bulwark* and that of *Jennie Gerhardt* are very similar indeed. A man who has

struggled righteously throughout his life to live by a particular religious and moral code finds himself bewildered by what he sees as disastrous events in his own family. Though he has tried to bequeath his own faith and sense of priorities to his children, he finds that at least some of his offspring violate his most cherished dicta, and he thinks that his erring children are irretrievably lost. However, by the end of each novel--and each father's life--the father in question comes to see that the very daughter who has seemed most openly and entirely to separate herself from his system of beliefs is in fact his most truly virtuous child. Despite her violation of convention and her apparent rejection of Solon's faith and standards, Etta, like Jennie before her, is seen to be more capable of love, generosity and spirituality than those of her siblings who have seemed to conform more closely with the dictates of her father's world view. Solon, like Gerhardt, comes to feel that despite the virtues of the system in which he has believed, he has been wrong in relying upon its tenets as a basis for inflexible judgment of others. Exactly like Gerhardt, Solon--the lawgiver--comes at last to feel that it is not for him either to judge or to forgive, but rather to offer his love and be tolerant in the face of life's mysteries. These are the very "truths" in fact which are implicit in the experience not only of Gerhardt and Solon, who themselves come to perceive them, but of one character after another throughout Dreiser's work. They are among the truths that, in my view, animate Dreiser's best fiction from the start. The complexity of judgment is Dreiser's great theme. From Hurstwood and Carrie through Clyde Griffiths, Dreiser repeatedly explores the severe difficulties encountered by every man in his effort either to assess others or to understand his own experience. It is partly for the purpose of exploring this theme that Dreiser's work continually focuses upon breakers of law and convention, as well as on the many judges who inevitably surround them.

Gerhardt, to be sure, is a relatively minor figure in *Jennie Gerhardt*, while Solon clearly is the bulwark of the book's title. (pp. 124, 302, 334) Still, Gerhardt's experience is central to Jennie Gerhardt, and his gradually developing capacity to see life in terms other than those legislated for him by his religious convictions stands as a backdrop to the experience of all the other characters in the novel. Like Gerhardt, both Lester and Jennie herself learn, in varying degrees, to put long-standing assumptions aside and let feeling take precedence over the dictates of society or conventional morality.

Solon's experience and development are, of course, depicted in far greater detail than Gerhardt's. Yet not only do the

two developments yield similar meanings, they also strike one of the recurring keynotes of Dreiser's life-work. Solon's experience, like Gerhardt's, speaks directly not only to the problem of judging others, but also to the stubborn if dazzling complexity of life, and its resistance to prescriptive or all-encompassing systems which would seek to contain and explain the inevitable chaos of experience. Like Gerhardt, Solon is seen from the outset to be cradled within a set of assumptions which seek to define and, if possible, eliminate all anomalies, and which give his life regularity and stability. Faith in both cases is buttressed by routine. As a young man Solon takes active pleasure in the regularity of his daily office tasks. (p. 172) He believes entirely in the value of "the guarded life." (p. 145)

Solon's beliefs, to be sure, contrast to some extent with the narrowness of Gerhardt's specific convictions: Solon's strong humanitarian bent is emphasized from the start. As a teenager, we learn, "the poetry and prophecy of the Bible... like the import of the Inner Light... already pervaded the mind of Solon." (p. 30) Indeed, Solon's total identification with Quaker convictions is sympathetically rendered, with emphasis on Solon's susceptibility to poetry and prophecy as well as dogma. His faith is identified with "spiritual understanding." (p. 29)

Solon, in addition, is shown to inherit certain doubts and conflicts as well as beliefs. Solon's father Rufus was already caught in the moral conflict (albeit the somewhat specious one) about whether or not to raise the Thornborough estate to new levels of luxury out of "moral obligation" to Phoebe. Solon himself develops within and extends his own awareness of such difficult questions as how to reconcile humility and affluence, especially once affluence may be taken for granted. The Quaker tenets are seen to provide only limited clarity on such an issue as this.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a series of dramatic incidents shows Solon in the course of his youth and early fatherhood to be sorely baffled at various times by the bewildering treachery of appearances. (pp. 16-18, 92-93, 115 ff.)

Unlike Gerhardt--and unlike Gerhardt's analogues in *An American Tragedy*, Asa and Elvira Griffiths--Solon is himself seen to be troubled all along by at least some doubt as to the universal applicability or adequacy of the system that he seeks to apply to all cases. The reader is asked to have sympathy both with Solon's at least intermittently questioning relation to Quakerism and with the humanitarian aspects of his faith.<sup>10</sup> Yet the system within which Solon lives is itself--like all other systems depicted in Dreiser's work--seen to be *by nature*

rigid, exclusive and therefore distorting. Thus as a young man working in his future father-in-law's bank

Solon, as always, saw everything in terms of divine order....

Life, to Solon...was a series of law-governed details, each one of which had the import of being directly concerned with divine will....To him the religion of George Fox and John Woolman was the solution of all earthly ills. (p. 90)

As a teenager, though Solon "did not know life" it was nonetheless clear to him that "all those who had...sinned were thoroughly bad, their souls irredeemable." (p. 35)<sup>11</sup> Later Solon is

compelled to learn...that in spite of a divinely ordered scheme of things and a willingness on the part of anyone to ally himself with the manifested plan, as far as one could determine it, still [strange]...things would occur. (p. 127)

Nonetheless, while Solon as an adult becomes increasingly aware of the peculiar, unwanted and apparently undeserved events which often seem to overtake people, "interrupting the normal progress of things and of men," (p. 168) he still remains convinced that,

in the main, if one could go far enough back, one would find them perhaps to be the sins of the fathers visited upon the children, even unto the third or fourth generations. God was on his throne....It was not for little man to rise and scoff and deny. (p. 168)

It is not until the death of his son and the approach of his own end that Solon comes to wonder about the strict inevitability of justice and to reassess his own role as moral arbiter of others.

For Solon, as for Gerhardt, Edward Malia Butler and Clyde Griffiths' parents, the real challenge to his system of values comes from his offspring. Even as children Stewart and Etta seem enigmas to their parents, "and so they remained. They had both begun dimly to suspect that they might not be easily embraced in any given theory of life." (p. 129) Solon is especially puzzled, if also fascinated, by his youngest son, by Stewart's

yellow hair and blue eyes and...cupid's mouth....It was a sensual mouth--how sensual, Barnes never quite fully

realized, being so conservative and timid emotionally that he did not wish to think of such things. (p. 143)

Here as elsewhere the emphasis is on what Solon shuts out of his vision through fear. Like many of his predecessors in Dreiser's work, Solon's whole life is geared to an ordering of experience which denies or subdues threatening elements. Stewart, on the other hand--who should be his father's steward--seeks to be an unbridled explorer from the start (p. 131), an explorer with his sights set most particularly on the forbidden horizon. (p. 169)

It is Stewart's explosive rebellion which shatters Solon's house of cards; but it is Etta's apparently less destructive self-assertion which in fact constitutes the more probing challenge to Solon's system. It is Etta's experience, moreover, which also provides the ultimate corrective to Solon's view of life.

If Solon is the last of Dreiser's self-righteous characters--the characters who assume that any given act or condition allows of only one interpretation--Etta is the last of all the seekers of the "ideal" in Dreiser's work. She is a more intelligent, active and self-conscious Jennie; but her antecedents are not in Jennie alone. Stewart's pursuit of forbidden pleasures ends catastrophically, as Etta's does not; but Etta's challenge to Solon is the more significant one, as well as the more typical within the Dreiser canon. Like Carrie and Clyde as well as Eugene Witla and Cowperwood, Etta seeks love, fulfillment, understanding, beauty. She is thus one of Dreiser's prototypically unsatisfied, thirsting souls--"taken with the virus of the ideal...never [to] escape it." (p. 129) Like Carrie and Jennie, Etta may be said to be one who "feels rather than reasons," and one who yearns toward the same ends as they do. From the start she is "a dreamer, stricken with those strange visions of beauty which sometimes hold us all spellbound, enthralled, but without understanding." (p. 129-30) Thus Etta is not only distinguished from her father and brothers; she is also aligned with all Dreiser's dreamers and seekers, those who demand the maximum from life, without any certainty as to which particular aims they should pursue. Like Carrie, whose search is representative of "all the blind strivings of the human heart," or Clyde in his search for "all the blisses," Etta's dreams and strivings are "entangled with the hopes and the yearnings of all men," (p. 130) even though--or especially since--they cannot easily find a form.

Interestingly, however, even as Etta seeks from the first to embrace and be embraced by all of "Life,"<sup>12</sup> she is also deeply identified with her father. As a child her eyes strik-

ingly resemble his (p. 143); and she always loves and respects him, even as she defies him. (p. 238) In his own way, indeed, Solon himself may be seen as a seeker of the ideal as well.<sup>13</sup> His search, however--like that of most men from Dreiser's point of view--is doomed by his prescriptive approach. He seeks the perfection of order and form, an island of faith and honor amid life's chaotic waters. As Dreiser sees it, however, an ideal of perfection which fortifies itself in exclusion rather than acceptance must be doomed. As Solon and even Benecia dimly perceive at odd moments

the atmosphere surrounding them seemed too fixed, too still. It was all too well ordered, too perfect, for frail, restless, hungry human need. (p. 185)

It is Etta whose experience epitomizes such "restless... need." Her portrait, to be sure, is not one of Dreiser's strongest; she is schematically conceived rather than dramatically realized. The schematism of her portrait, however, makes the issues all the clearer. An Isabel Archer or Dorothea Brooke in intention, Etta is a kind of nineteenth century heroine, explicitly intent upon "the individual's desire for growth and self-development." (p. 239) In order to fulfill that desire she must defy her father. When she returns home after Stewart's death she begs his forgiveness. "'I know now how much suffering I have caused thee,'" she says;

'--I need so much thy forgiveness and thy love. Can thee not forgive me?'....After a full minute of silence he said,

'Daughter, I know now that it is not for me or thee to judge or forgive anyone. God and God alone can forgive. Pray to Him as I do now, every hour.' (p. 314)

Readers of *The Bulwark* have often felt that Dreiser himself identified with Solon's piety.<sup>14</sup> It seems to me however that Solon's piety is not the final chord struck by the novel as a whole and that, in addition, Solon's final piety is not even the most significant element in his own personal experience.

At the end of the novel, to be sure, Solon is extremely pious; still his overall outlook has changed. By the end of his life Solon has gained a new sense of humility, of the littleness of man, under the sign of God. Solon's faith in God of course is not very different at the end than it was in the beginning; Solon has always had faith in God. What is new and crucial at the end of Solon's life is his capacity to refrain from judgment, to accept and love Etta rather than condemn her. Solon's faith itself is nothing new; but the capa-

city to restrain himself from seeking to impose that faith on others--to legislate for them--this is what Solon has lacked, and what he gains before his death. Solon's final apprehension of the "variety and beauty and tragedy of life" (p. 317) is part of a new openness, a new acceptance of life's multifaceted reality.

Solon's new openness and charity, moreover, dovetail with Etta's final experience. As Etta renews her contact with Solon she is not only suffused, like Jennie Gerhardt, with love for her father and respect for his life-long struggles; she also becomes susceptible to a "dawning revelation of the meaning of the faith." (p. 328) It is a great mistake however to equate Etta's sympathetic interest in her father's religion with some kind of true conversion of her own. Etta becomes susceptible to "the weight of spiritual beauty that lay in the lives of men such as John Woolman and her father," (p. 330; my italics). This is not to say that she has embraced their beliefs for herself.

It is precisely with the question of Etta's final approach to life--the direction she will take--that *The Bulwark* comes to a close. Solon's last words are to Etta: "'If thee does not turn to the Inner Light, where will thee go?'" (p. 334) he asks. For Solon the Inner Light has always served as a bulwark against chaos. If Etta herself is not to be engulfed by chaos, her father can offer only one protective stay. The implication at the end of the novel, however, is that Etta will continue to be too honest, too open, too searching to accept her father's solution.

At Solon's funeral his successful, priggish, conventional son attacks Etta in her grief. "'Why should you cry?'" Orville asks his sister, "'You were the one to start all the trouble in our family.'" (p. 336-7) Etta responds "without anger or reproof," "'Oh, I am not crying for myself, or for Father,'" she says. "'I am crying for Life.'" (p. 337) With this Isobel appears, taking Etta's arm affectionately and leading her out past Orville to the funeral cortege. The novel ends, and we remain, with a sense of Etta's reaching out, not for the Inner Light, but for Life itself.

*The Bulwark* presents Etta's struggle with a great deal of sympathy. Here, as so often before, Dreiser is concerned with the maddening difficulty which faces anyone who seeks to perceive and take hold of "Life." In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser had underlined man's incapacity to sustain any true apprehension of "the misery of things,"<sup>15</sup> of reality itself. Hurstwood and Carrie come together only to go their separate ways, blaming each other and averting their eyes from one another, even as



the novel seeks to involve the reader intimately and sympathetically with the experience of them both.

In *Carrie* Dreiser dramatized, as he later would often again, the narcissistic self-enclosure that insulates man from experience. Thus we leave *Carrie* sitting in her expensive suite at the Waldorf, deeply moved by *Pere Goriot*, of all novels, while *Hurstwood*, begging for a dime, slips and falls in the snow outside. *Carrie* has been seen to stand, at the end of the novel, on the brink of a "great and soul-rending discovery."<sup>16</sup> But *Carrie* is in fact incapable of any significant perception either about herself or about the world she inhabits. In his middle-class characters, like *Eugene Witla* or *Cowperwood*, Dreiser had depicted people who, unlike *Carrie* or *Clyde*, did seek consciously to contemplate the meaning of existence. Yet *Eugene* and *Cowperwood*, both clearly more intelligent and more gifted than *Carrie* or *Clyde*, nonetheless fail--just like their apparent "inferiors"--to find either enduring satisfaction or real insight into their experience.

*Etta* is Dreiser's last and most concentrated attempt to create not a *Carrie* or a *Clyde*, but an intelligent, sensitive protagonist who reflects upon her life asking "what had all this experience meant and what did it mean now?" (p. 336) Dreiser's portrait of *Etta* is only partially successful. Insofar as it does prove effective, however, its success depends upon qualities that *Etta* shares, not with *Eugene Witla* or *Cowperwood* but with Dreiser's more primitive--and more artistically effective--earlier creations: *Carrie*, *Jennie*, *Clyde*. Despite the affluence and intelligence which might seem to link *Etta* with *Lester*, *Cowperwood* or *Eugene Witla*--those among Dreiser's seekers more clearly given to "reason" or conceptualization--*Etta*'s approach to life, like *Carrie*'s and more particularly like *Jennie*'s, is intuitive. Her final insight, her crying "for life," is the antidote to *Solon*'s aggressive forcing of life into a system. *Etta*'s tears imply an acceptance of life more complete than her father's. The acceptance is signalled by her restrained response to *Orville*'s attack. Furthermore it is not *Orville*'s anger but the reciprocal warmth between *Etta* and *Isobel* which ends the funeral scene, and the novel as a whole. Even more than *Jennie*, whom we leave at the close of the novel as she numbly contemplates the empty days which stretch ahead of her in the wake of *Lester*'s death, *Etta* is seen at the end not only to recognize the pain and uncertainty of life as it is, but also to possess the resources for satisfaction within it. "If thee does not turn to the Inner Light where will thee go?" *Solon* had said--his last words to *Etta*, and to anyone. *Etta* is shown in the final chapters of the novel to have arrived at a deep appreciation of her father's spiritual worth. It is no accident however that

*The Bulwark* ends not with Solon but with Etta. It is clear at the end of the book that Etta has not in fact turned to the Inner Light as Solon would have had it. The answer to his question about Etta's future is contained in her "crying for life" as she sees it, in her lack of anger toward Orville and in her love for her sister.

Solon's increasing humility and responsiveness, Etta's compassion and loving generosity are not strictly "Quaker" qualities, any more than Berenice's perspective at the end of *The Stoic* is entirely the result of her experiments with Hinduism. Dreiser's portrait of Berenice is still weaker and more strained than his conception of Solon or Etta. Yet even Berenice's explorations in *The Stoic* must be seen as part and parcel of Dreiser's life-long interest in all possible modes of seeking and striving--for material goods, spiritual satisfaction, love, money, nirvana. If Carrie or Clyde's vague but passionate longings drew them first of all to the most concrete, glittering and tawdry of ends, Jennie's route to "the ideal" was through love and "Nature." If Cowperwood's motto--"I satisfy myself"--impelled him toward the most singlemindedly secular pursuits, Eugene Witla's longings had already led him to explore not only the more lofty realm of artistic creativity, but also astrology and Christian Science.

Berenice's "development," her journey to India, her exposure to the Guru, while theoretically an antidote to her original naivete and sheltered narcissism, all lack dramatic tension. They contain only pale echoes of Dreiser's earlier, seeking protagonists. One interesting aspect of Berenice's odyssey, however, is the peculiar similarity between certain of the Guru's pronouncements, and the assumptions which underlie even Dreiser's earliest novels.

"If a man come to your door," the Guru tells Berenice, "go and meet yourself." (p. 295) These words could serve as the motto for all of Dreiser's work, with its assumption that the lowest and the highest of human creatures are very much the same. Dreiser's fiction repeatedly suggests that men who seem to differ greatly from each other are more alike than they appear. His work is firmly rooted from the start in the conviction that the reader is not necessarily immune from such a fate as Hurstwood's, that the soul of an artist, a financier, or a philosopher is no less likely than that of Clyde Griffiths to harbor mean or brutal impulses which could, under certain circumstances, lead to crime and even murder. I would suggest, indeed, that Dreiser's interest in criminals, "fallen women," and social outcasts of all kinds stems in large part from his conviction that a Hurstwood or a Clyde in his desires, doubts, and weaknesses resembles a Cowperwood, a Witla, or in

fact the reader himself, much more than most of us would care to admit. The Guru's words about meeting oneself through a stranger at one's door are addressed quite specifically to the act of charity, of helping an outcast (cf. p. 305). The Guru, quite like *Sister Carrie* and Dreiser's other early fiction, insists that ultimately the distinctions between rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief are basically arbitrary. *Sister Carrie* had already underscored the need for us all to confront the common ground between men, however different in social standing and manifest moral achievement. Each of Dreiser's novels may be seen to constellate around the same cluster of issues. The vision culminates in *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser's most elaborate but concentrated exploration of man's inexhaustible appetite for what is beyond him, and the painful limits he encounters in his effort either to make sense of his own experience, or accurately to grasp the experience of others.

In *The Stoic*, as in *The Bulwark*, Dreiser seems to place some of his most enduring presuppositions at the center of his work and to derive from them a new kind of comfort, if not a new artistic power. Dreiser's conviction of the need to refrain from judgment, or his sense of the analogy between the most primitive and the most sophisticated of men, had served over a period of 25 years to endow his work with a force and a dimension often lacking in the work of the naturalists with whom he is often still associated. In his last novels some of Dreiser's governing preoccupations reappear in a more pat or diluted form, a form which largely deprives them of their galvanizing power. Still, it is important to see that the Guru's counsel to Berenice, like the lessons Solon and Etta learn, do not constitute a sudden, incomprehensible transformation of all Dreiser's long-standing beliefs.

Clyde Griffiths had longed for wealth and Sondra Finchley; Eugene for artistic achievement; Cowperwood for financial empires. In the course of their striving, all of Dreiser's characters ultimately encountered similar obstacles, just as the impulses which governed Clyde's aspirations were seen not to be essentially different from those which moved Eugene or Cowperwood. Eugene seeks beauty through the creation of art; Cowperwood strives to collect it. Clyde Griffiths finds beauty in the gilded *Kitsch* of the Green Davidson Hotel; but in their depth and strength his desires themselves are seen to be valuable--quite apart from the particular shoddy objects upon which they seize. Clyde's search for beauty, indeed, is seen at its source to be quite as meaningful as other, apparently far more noble quests. "Even in the lowest kinds of attraction," says Berenice's Guru, "there is the germ of Divine Love."

"The ignorant man does not know it, but yet, consciously, or unconsciously, he is attracted by it, and it alone. *So even the lowest forms of attraction derive their power from God Himself....*The Lord is the great magnet, and we are all iron filings; all of us are being constantly attracted by Him, and all of us are struggling to reach Him, the face of Brahman reflected through all forms and designs." (p. 292; my italics)

In the end Berenice concludes that Cowperwood's own "worship and constant search for beauty in every form, and especially in the form of a woman, was nothing more than a search for the Divine design behind all forms--the face of Brahman shining through." (p. 305)<sup>17</sup>

Dreiser's earlier work can hardly be said to have been informed by the serene conviction of any such Divine design. As I have suggested, however, Dreiser certainly did assume not only that a Carrie, a Hurstwood or a Clyde was as likely to be driven by undefined and irresistible longings as a Cowperwood or a Witla, but also that the impulse toward the ideal, toward wholeness and beauty--or call it the Divine--was likely to take many different and often peculiar forms. Thus Carrie's longing for a little tan jacket or Clyde's ecstatic contemplation of the lobby at the Green Davidson Hotel were all seen to be valid and indeed typical expressions of the human spirit in its reach for what is beyond it or for whatever it conceives of as sublime. Unlike much of his earlier fiction, Dreiser's last novels do not really manage to embody with conviction the hunger, the beauty, the energy or the desperation of the human spirit. Dreiser's vision was so coherent, however, that its basic assumptions endured, even in his least successful fiction, even in the mouth of Berenice's Guru.

With Dreiser's last novels, of course, a new balance of sympathies emerges. I have proposed that Dreiser's best fiction derives part of its strength from Dreiser's capacity both to dramatize and to value such striving as Carrie's or Clyde's. In *Sister Carrie* or *An American Tragedy* the protagonist's pursuit for the goods of this world was at some level clearly equated with the pursuit of beauty and the ideal. "We all have our feelings and emotions, but lack the power of self-expression," Dreiser had said in *The "Genius."* Implicitly the value of seemingly ignoble or inarticulate dreams was seen to be no lower than the value of sublime and highly articulated ones. Indeed, like Balzac, Dreiser himself throughout most of his life was driven by the lust for material splendors as well as the will to affirm the compatibility of worldly satisfaction with such loftier aims as artistic achievement. Dreiser had already sought to depict the ravages of this very conflict

quite directly in *The "Genius."* Eugene's efforts to conceptualize the conflict, however, could not begin to resolve it, and served indeed only to confuse the issue and to weaken the novel itself.

Unlike Eugene Witla, Dreiser's most effective characters are his most primitive, limited ones, the very ones who are essentially unaware of any contradiction between, say, the pursuit of money or finery and the attainment of "all the blisses," of Paradise itself. The final image of Carrie, brooding restlessly in her rocking chair, suggests some doubt about the equation; but such an image could be haunting and evocative, while Eugene Witla's theorizing is boring and puerile. Dreiser's best novels clearly are those in which he both depicts the passion of striving and implicitly affirms the value of the pursuit, whatever its particular goals. His worst fiction either overintellectualizes the issue or excessively moralizes it.

Carrie, Hurstwood and Clyde Griffiths had succinctly and effectively embodied Dreiser's vision of the nature of man's aspiration, its driving hungers and often unlikely direction. By the time of *The Bulwark* his vision is diluted and truncated. Stewart's desperate struggle is reminiscent of Carrie or Clyde's search for fortune and pleasure; but it is Etta, not Stewart, who seeks beauty, fulfillment, the elusive ideal itself. In her quest, moreover, Etta seizes upon more conventionally appropriate objects than Carrie or Clyde: Etta pursues intellectual freedom and spiritual as well as physical harmony with a lover who is not only an artist, but one wholly dedicated to the purity of art. In order to preserve that purity, in fact, Etta's lover must leave her in the end. In *The Stoic*, though Cowperwood continues his efforts to conquer beautiful women and the worlds of high finance, he becomes increasingly aware of the futility of all effort. In *Berenice*, moreover, the search for fulfillment, for beauty and the ideal becomes at last totally divorced from the world of toil and the demands of the flesh.

The increasing "purity" of Dreiser's conception of the ideal makes for severe artistic difficulties in his late novels, and it does so because the vitality of Dreiser's best work was inextricably bound up with his conviction as to the value of earthly struggle. Dreiser's vital sense of the value of striving pervades his major fiction even if, from the start, all achievement and all satisfaction is suspect as illusion. In Dreiser's last novels, on the other hand, the vague intermittent doubt which plagued Carrie in her rocking chair becomes a pervasive skepticism. Such skepticism dominates these novels, and finally vitiates them. At the same

time, the "hope and zest and youth" which was seen in *An American Tragedy* to be "at the bottom of all the constructive energy of the world everywhere"<sup>19</sup> is replaced by a longing for the ideal which tends to seize upon less outrageous objects of aspiration. Hence the last novels lose in passion and drama what they seem to gain in equanimity. The tolerance and love of man which were everywhere implicit in Dreiser's earlier work come to the fore in *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic*. Yet because that love is isolated from its all-too-human, its erring objects, it becomes too theoretical for effective fiction.

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore Dreiser, *The Bulwark* (New York: Doubleday, 1946), p. 185. Further references to this edition will be included in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Theodore Dreiser, *The Stoic* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1974), pp. 295, 305. Further references to this edition will be included in the text.

<sup>3</sup>See Lionel Trilling, "Reality in America," in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), pp. 29-31; Charles Shapiro, *Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 43; Philip Gerber, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 182; Richard Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 238.

<sup>4</sup>See Trilling, p. 29; Shapiro, p. 67; Sidney Richman, "Theodore Dreiser's *The Bulwark*: A Final Resolution," *American Literature*, 34 (1962), 236. One of the few critics to see the continuity between *The Bulwark* and Dreiser's earlier works is Gerald Willen, "Dreiser's Moral Seriousness," in *Dreiser: Twentieth Century Views*, ed. John Lydenberg (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 102. Cf. Donald Pizer's chapter on *The Bulwark* in *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976).

<sup>5</sup>In 1977, *Modern Fiction Studies* published a special Dreiser issue. In his preface, Jack Salzman, the editor of the issue, noted that *An American Tragedy* and even more so *Sister Carrie* drew the greatest critical response. He noted a resurgence of interest in *The "Genius"* and the *Trilogy*, "while little if any interest was evinced in such works as *Jennie Gerhardt* and *The Bulwark*." "Editor's Preface" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Theodore Dreiser Number (Autumn 1977), p. 339.

<sup>6</sup>See Lehan, p. 229. Cf. Robert Forrey, "Theodore Dreiser:

Oedipus Redivivus" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, pp. 334, 354. Dreiser's portrait of Edward Butler in *The Financier* is another important exception to the supposed rule of Dreiser's unsympathetic attitude to fathers in his work.

<sup>7</sup>Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt* (New York: Dell, 1964), p. 96. Further references to this edition will be included in the text.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. *Jennie Gerhardt*, pp. 242-3. Cf., too, Gerhardt's relationship with Vesta in this regard (pp. 125-9; 188).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. *The Bulwark*, pp. 25, 38, 39, 56, 60, 112, 113, 138. The clash between Quaker precepts and the rapidly changing, materialistic world of American society has often been taken as the main focus of *The Bulwark*. Cf. Gerber, p. 159; John J. McAleer, *Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 102.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Shapiro, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. *The Bulwark*, p. 106.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30, 160.

<sup>13</sup>See *Ibid.*, pp. vi-vii. Gerber speaks of Solon's Quakerism as a utopian vision (p. 159).

<sup>14</sup>See Edward Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (New York: Henry Holt, 1952), p. 292; Trilling, pp. 29-30.

<sup>15</sup>Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: The New American Library, 1961), p. 304.

<sup>16</sup>Gerber, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. the idea that there is irony implicit in Cowperwood's pursuit of the ideal: "The Comic Voice in Dreiser's Cowperwood Narrative," *American Literature*, 53, no. 1 (1981), pp. 69, 70.

<sup>18</sup>Theodore Dreiser, *The "Genius"* (New York: The New American Library, 1967), p. 226.

<sup>19</sup>Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (New York: The New American Library, 1964), p. 190.

## REVIEWS

### Dreiser's Internal Tug-of-War

*Dreiser and His Fiction* by Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr.  
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,  
1983, viii & 215 pp.

In the opening chapter of *Dreiser and His Fiction*, Lawrence Hussman observes that the novelist, despite his widespread reputation as an objective determinist and hard-line naturalist, "always led with his heart," thereby identifying the split in Dreiser's personality which has held the attention of critics for decades. That Dreiser himself recognized such a contradiction is clear as Hussman reviews the therapeutic diary kept by Dreiser during his breakdown after the publishing debacle of *Sister Carrie*. In these pages he wrote of an internal struggle between acquisitiveness and compassion so extreme that he experienced a physical sense of being two distinct persons. One was a "tall, thin, greedy individual who had struggled and thought always for himself and how he would prosper." The other contender for psychic supremacy was "a silent, philosophical soul" who "seemed to brood apart over my fate."

It is in this same internal tension that Hussman locates the thesis for his engrossing study, stated variously throughout the book in terms of the conflict between self-interest and self-sacrifice, between giving and receiving, between duty and desire, and between self and society. That Dreiser himself recognized the fundamental tug-of-war in his personality is interpreted by Hussman as the stimulation for the "continued search. . . for ethical meanings" which informs both Dreiser's personal life and his fiction and is the thread upon which the chapters of Hussman's book are strung.



All of Dreiser's fiction may be fitted rather neatly into the developing pattern of the give-take dichotomy, according to Hussman. Consider the first novels, *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. On the one hand, we see a woman (Carrie Meeber) who though torn by twin impulses toward acquisitiveness and humanitarianism, stands as the paradigm for human self-interest. On the other hand, Dreiser portrays Carrie's opposite, a woman (Jennie Gerhardt) who is "a model of selfless dedication to others." In *A Trilogy of Desire*, most particularly in *The Financier* and *The Titan*, which preceded *The Stoic* by thirty years, Dreiser presents a "complex, mostly negative, appraisal of ruthless self-serving as a way of life." Although these two novels themselves take cognizance of the tension that separates self from society, their common hero, Frank Cowperwood, very early in his life opts for the former and becomes a rather thoroughgoing materialist. If Carrie Meeber is a "merry, unthinking moth of the flame" of worldly acquisition, power, fame, then Cowperwood is a "taciturn, thoughtful moth circling a somewhat brighter light fueled by the same energy source."

With good reason, *The "Genius"* is interpreted wholly autobiographically and concerns, says Hussman, that same "series of conflicts that tore at Dreiser again and again in his own life: his duty to his art as opposed to his material desires; his pursuit of feminine beauty as opposed to his duty to his wife as specified in his marriage vows; his compulsion to accept a deterministic explanation of existence as opposed to his need to believe in transcendent meaning." The novel's hero, Eugene Witla, oscillates between "almost a belief in Christian Science" and "almost a belief that a devil ruled the world."

The marriage theme which dominates the plot of *The "Genius"* is continued in what Hussman terms "the marriage group" of Dreiser's shorter fiction. In the give and take between marital partners, he suggests that Dreiser found "a paradigm of the larger conflict between self-interest and self-sacrifice that is at the center of all social relationships." Here are treated a variety of stories, some well known: "Married," "The Second Choice," "Free"; and some relatively obscure: "Chains," "Marriage--For One," "The Shadow." Dreiser in most instances perceived marriage as an unstable compound, each member of the partnership striving for control, neither capable of "the elusive balance between giving to and receiving from the other that could create harmony and happiness." A reader is gratified to see Hussman treat Dreiser's shorter fiction on an equal basis with the novels (too many critics either ignore or disparage the short stories), but notes the inexplicable omission of important and relevant stories such as

"The Old Neighborhood" in which the give-take conflict is of considerable importance.

In several respects Hussman finds that Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* epitomizes "the conflict between desire and duty which is the heart" of all his novels. The *Tragedy* is dealt with at length and with the same graceful lucidity as those novels which precede it in this absorbing volume. So far so good. Hussman next turns to the posthumous novels, *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic*, and now a significant change is perceived in Dreiser's life--and therefore in his theme. This change had first become evident to Hussman in *An American Tragedy*, where, rather than defend Clyde Griffiths as "a vigorous self-seeking moth of the lamp," Dreiser had castigated society for ever lighting that lamp in the first place:

Slowly, the fundamental conflict between the self and some call from beyond the self, evident in Dreiser's thinking from the beginning, was being resolved. Inexorably, the balance was shifting toward duty, responsibility, giving.

Between the 1920s, when *An American Tragedy* appeared, and the 1940s, when work on the final novels commenced, Hussman contends that Dreiser's "anguished search" for the intrinsic meaning of life culminated in a "leap to faith" which his final novels document.

In this view, Dreiser is seen as rejecting the self-interest ethic in favor of love and service. Hence, Solon Barnes, hero of *The Bulwark*, is perceived not as one duped by life into trusting a will-o'-the-wisp religious bulwark that inevitably fails him, but rather as a heroic figure who upholds his ethical principles come what may against all tribulations and thereby proves himself a triumphant and never-failing bulwark of faith. For Hussman *The Bulwark* is not at all the weak and vacillating novel which other critics may have found it. Rather, it offers a reader the "most mature world view" in all of Dreiser's fiction. Something of the same is suggested for the controversial conclusion of *The Stoic*, although the case here is clouded by the degree to which Helen Dreiser's wishes shaped that novel's present ending, one in which self-interest is rejected in favor of service to society.

In his conclusion, Hussman states his belief that Dreiser during the 1930s hoped "to bridge the gap between science and religion. Psychologically readied by his years of seeking, he finally came to affirm a new-found faith near the end of his life." It is at this point that Hussman's readers will need to choose whether they will stay with him or part company. This is so because, while an impressive array of data supports

the view that Dreiser himself underwent a type of "conversion"--and Hussman utilizes this data to excellent advantage--there still remains much evidence which points in an opposite direction. The posthumously edited *Notes on Life*, for instance, are not at all clear cut on this issue, although one would expect that any radical alteration in Dreiser's fundamental view of life might be expressed clearly here if anywhere.

Whether or not one is willing finally to go all the way with Hussman's hypothesis, one will find the individual chapters of his book well argued, well-written, and valuable always for their insights. As a whole, the book achieves a sense of unity not commonly found in such studies, this clearly the result of its single thesis and the author's competence in organizing his material as he demonstrates the consistent development of theme and its evolution from early to late. The book is a distinguished addition to Dreiser scholarship and one for which I predict a long life among Dreiser enthusiasts.

Philip L. Gerber

## DREISER NEWS & NOTES

Dreiser's niece, Dr. Vera Dreiser, has recently donated her private collection to Emory University, where it will be housed among the Special Collections at the Robert W. Woodruff Library. Concerning a reception planned in recognition of this gift, Linda M. Matthews, Head of Special Collections, writes: "The Friends of the Emory Libraries are hosting a reception on the evening of October 25, at which Neda Westlake will be the featured speaker, her topic 'The Peril and Pleasure of Editing Theodore Dreiser.' Guest of honor will be Dr. Vera Dreiser, who has recently donated to Emory a collection of autographed Dreiser first editions, photographs, artifacts and mementoes. These materials will be on exhibit for the occasion. . . . Dr. Dreiser now lives in Atlanta and was anxious to have this collection in Atlanta." . . . The University of Pennsylvania Press has announced the November publication of *An Amateur Laborer*, edited by Richard W. Dowell, James L. W. West III and Neda Westlake. . . . In her Spring 1983 review of *The Works of Theodore Dreiser In Twenty Volumes*, Dr. Neda Westlake identified the Dreiser Collection's set as "a gift from the publisher," the Rinsen Book Company of Kyoto, Japan. As it turns out, the set is instead a gift from Mr. Harold Dies, Trustee of the Dreiser Trust, who has a standing arrangement with Curtis Brown, Ltd., to send a copy or set of all foreign-published Dreiser titles to the Dreiser Collection at the University of Pennsylvania.